

110523 English Sermon "Imitation of Christ" Matthew 23:1-12

My Fair Lady is a musical with a book and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. The story concerns Eliza Doolittle, a Cockney flower girl who takes speech lessons from professor Henry Higgins, so that she may pass as a lady. Despite his cynical nature and difficulty understanding women, Henry grows attached to her. In a scene, Eliza Doolittle is complaining to her boyfriend Freddy that he talks a good line but that talking about love is never enough. "Words! Words! Words!" she sings. "I'm so sick of words! Don't waste my time, show me! Don't talk at all! Show me!"

In a sense, in today's Matthew 23, Jesus is pointing out to the Pharisees and the scribes their superficial faith that is just words, words, words and has no love in it. Matthew 23 is filled with Jesus' warnings to the scribes and the Pharisees. Yet it is important to note that verses 1 to 12 are given to "the Jewish crowd and the disciples." This chapter functions as a negative example for those who follow Jesus to be careful of the scribes and the Pharisees.

To better understand Jesus' criticism of the Pharisees and the scribes, it would be good to recall their main motivations and characteristics. We see that the two important critiques Jesus offers in this passage relate to (1) their lack of obedience when teaching the Torah to the people; (2) The motivation to follow the law as a way to gain human favor and honor.

In verse 2, Jesus said the scribes and the Pharisees sit on "Moses' seat". The term "Moses' seat" here refers to the authority of teaching of the law of God. Jesus told people to do and obey the very words they teach. However, he told them not to imitate their lives and their actions. In other words, the biggest problem with the scribes and the Pharisees at the time was that their words and their lives did not agree.

In verse 5, he said, "They do all their deeds to be seen by others; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long." Here, phylacteries are called [tepilin] in Hebrew, and it was a custom based on Deuteronomy 6:8, "Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead". This refers to a small box attached to a leather strap, in which the words of God were written on a small scroll.

They followed these words literally. It is clear that having the Word of God close to their daily lives is a truly beautiful thing. They certainly started with good intentions, but as time went by, they became more conscious of the gaze and applause of visible people rather than conscious of the invisible God. That's the problem! Their intention was not to live according to the words of God, but to show such behavior to others and enjoy appearing holier than others. For that purpose, they made the strap bigger so it would be more visible to people. They seek honor from people rather than praise from God alone for their religious observance.

In the same sense, they enjoyed sitting in high places and enjoyed the title of teacher or rabbi instead of thinking about how to love God more and enjoying living according to the Word of God.

In contrast, Jesus' followers are called not to elevate any of them above the others. This is quite a countercultural demand! People are prone to desire prestige and status. It was the same for people 2,000 years ago, and it is the same today. In fact, earlier in Matthew the disciples struggle to understand Jesus' teaching on servant leadership and status reversal. Unlike the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus did not just say words, words, words but showed them and showed us.

Jesus himself carried the cross to bear the sins of humankind. While it was

impossible to bear the burden that the Pharisees and scribes placed on the people, Jesus' yoke is easy and light because Jesus himself bears the weight of our sins. When we sincerely realize the love of God and confess our sins, He has promised forgiveness of sins and Immanuel, God With Us.

Starting with many stories in the Old Testament and continuing through many stories in the New Testament, God had been using all the right words: By grace you are saved. By my love you are redeemed. But like Eliza Doolittle, we still didn't get it. We often say show us! And God did so. God stretched out his hands on the cross. The grace of forgiveness and love, that none of us could ever achieve, and none of us could ever deserve. This grace was given through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's a priceless gift.

John Newton had been the captain of a ship engaged in the slave trade. A huge storm arose and swamped the ship. Newton prayed with a faith he barely knew he had, and when the storm abated, he was still, almost miraculously, alive. And so the song: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

Of course, as Newton knew well, it was not the word grace that saved him; it was the God of grace who saved him. Through grace, God saves us. When Newton praised the grace that saved, he was not only praising the fact that he'd been saved from the storm. Far more important he'd been saved from his sins. Sometimes we wonder what "sin" looks like, but in his case it was pretty clear to him. He'd been making a living by slavery, by a practice that owned, exploited, and disposed of his fellow human beings.

So, he didn't just sing about grace; he lived it. He showed it. As a man forgiven, he gave up his work for the slave owners and became one of the leaders of the abolition movement in Great Britain. And here's what he knew.

He had not been saved because he was such a good man, because he wasn't all that good. He had not been saved because he was a pious man. He had been saved by God's amazing grace.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, let us live close to the word of God. And let us live consciously of God, not to be seen by others. In our journey of faith, we will certainly continue to experience God's amazing grace. Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, your family, your business, your studies, and with the lives of your children. To Christ be thanks and praise. Amen.